Environmental Labeling: Scope of this Report

Labeling programs can be classified according to a number of program characteristics, as illustrated on the following figure (Figure 1). The most important is whether the program relies on first-party or third-party verification[1]. The former is performed by marketers on their own behalf to promote the positive environmental attributes of their products. Programs relying on first-party verification are not addressed in this report. Third-party verification is carried out by an independent source that awards labels to products based on certain environmental criteria or standards. Environmental labeling programs can also be characterized as positive, negative, or neutral. Positive labeling programs typically certify that labeled products possess one or more environmentally preferable attributes. Negative labeling warns consumers about the harmful or hazardous ingredients contained in the labeled products. Neutral labeling programs simply summarize environmental information about products that can be interpreted by consumers as part of their purchasing decisions. Third-party environmental labeling programs can be further classified as either mandatory or voluntary. Mandatory programs include hazard or warning labels, and information disclosure labels. Voluntary labels are typically positive or neutral, and are further classified as either report cards, seal-of-approval, or single-attribute certification programs.

The US programs covered in this report include mandatory government programs, voluntary seal-of-approval programs, single-attribute programs, hazard warning programs, and information disclosure programs. Due to the scope of this report, not every labeling program that may be in existence today is covered (e.g., food is not covered), and the report should not be seen as a comprehensive study of all labeling programs worldwide. The report presents a snapshot of the major environmental labeling programs in existence during the research phase for which information was available.

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[1] Verification refers to an evaluation process or determination that products or services meet specified criteria or claims.

Figure 1: Classification of Environmental Labeling

Environmental Labeling

First-Party
Environmental Labeling Programs

Third-Party
Environmental Labeling Programs

Product-Related

Corporate-Related

Mandatory

Voluntary

Hazard or
Warning
(e.g., Pesticides,
Prop. 65)

Information
Disclosure
(e.g., EPA fuel
economy label)

Environmental
Certification
Programs

Claims
(e.g., Recyclable)

Cause-Related
Marketing
(e.g., "Proceeds
donated to...")

Cause-Related
Marketing
(e.g., Company
supports WWF)

Promotion of
Corporate Env.
Activity or
Performance

On Products
or Shelf labels

In Ads

Report
Card

Seal of
Approval

Single
Attribute
Certification